

Message Text

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ACTION A-01

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 SSO-00 SS-15 NSC-05 USIE-00
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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3077

WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 06763

WHITE HOUSE FOR APPOINTMENTS SECRETARY AND ADVANCE
OFFICE (FOR HECKMAN)

STATE FOR A

E.O. 11652: ADS, DECLAS 5/15/78

TAGS: OVIP (CARTER, JIMMY), UK

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO EUROPE - THE CURRENT
POLITICAL SCENE IN BRITAIN AND PROSPECTS FOR
AN ELECTION.

1. BEGIN UNCLAS. BRITAIN IS GOVERNED BY A PARLIAMENT-
ARY DEMOCRACY WITH THE MONARCHY PLAYING A LARGELY
CEREMONIAL BUT NONETHELESS IMPORTANT ROLE. THE BRITISH
PARLIAMENT IS COMPOSED OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
(ELECTED) AND THE HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY AND
APPOINTED FOR LIFE TERMS). THE HOUSE OF LORDS HAS
RETAINED SOME POWERS BUT FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES
LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY RESIDES IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

2. THE PARTY HOLDING THE LARGEST NUMBER OF SEATS IN
THE HOUSE OF COMMONS USUALLY FORMS THE GOVERNMENT AND
USUALLY ALONE (THERE HAS BEEN NO COALITION GOVERNMENT
IN BRITAIN SINCE WORLD WAR II), ALTHOUGH THE PRESENT
GOVERNMENT DEPENDS ON THE SUPPORT TTOF MINOR PARTIES FOR
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ITS SURVIVAL. THE CURRENT MEMBERSHIP (APRIL 25) OF THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS, TOTALING 635 SEATS, WITH 4 NON-VOTING
MMEMBERS, IS AS FOLLOWS: LABOR 309, CONSERVATIVES 278,
LIBERALS 13, SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY 11, WELSH PARTY 3,
ULSTER UNIONISTS 10, INDEPENDENTN SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY 2,
INDEPENDENT 1, SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC LABOR 1. THERE ARE
PRESENTLY 3 VACANT SEATS. LABOR WAS RETURNED TO OFFICE

IN MARCH 1974 AND RE-ELECTED IN OCTOBER 1974 WITH THE THEN-LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY, HAROLD WILSON, AS PRIME MINISTER. WILSON RESIGNED FROM THE LEADERSHIP IN THE SPRING OF 1976 (BUT REMAINED A MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS) AND LABOR MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ELECTED JAMES CALLAGHAN AS LEADER AND THEREFORE PRIME MINISTER.

3. ELECTION MECHANISM. MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ARE ELECTED FOR A FIVE YEAR TERM AND THE PRESENT HOUSE OF COMMONS COULD IN THEORY RUN UNTIL OCTOBER 1979. BEFORE THE TERM IS COMPLETED HOWEVER, THE PRIME MINISTER COULD CHOOSE TO CALL AN ELECTION OR BE FORCED TO IF HIS GOVERNMENT LOST A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE. CALLAGHAN SURVIVED SUCH A VOTE ON MARCH 23 BY PATCHING UP AN ARRANGEMENT WITH LIBERAL MPS WHICH GUARANTEED THEIR SUPPORT. END UKCLAS

4. BEGIN CONFIDENTIAL. ELECTION PROSPECTS. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS AND RECENT BY-ELECTIONS HAVE DEMONSTRATED A POPULAR SWING OF SUPPORT TO THE CONSERVATIVES BASED PRIMARILY ON THE ELECTORATE'S LOSS OF ENTHUSIASM FOR THE LABOR GOVERNMENT. THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT, IF A GENERAL ELECTION SHOULD OCCUR IN THE NEAR FUTURE, THE LABOR PARTY WOULD BE DEFEATED. WHAT IS LESS SURE IS

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WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 06763

WHETHER THE CONSERVATIVES WOULD BE ELECTED BY AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS. THIS WOULD

DEPEND IN LARGE PART ON SCOTTISH NATIONALIST EFFORTS TO WIN SCOTTISH SEATS.

5. CALLAGHAN IS DETERMINED TO AVOID A NATIONAL ELECTION ANY TIME SOON. MRS. THATCHER, THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, WANTS TO FORCE ONE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. AN ELECTION IS UNLIKELY, HOWEVER, UNTIL THE COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS CALLAGHAN HAS WORKED OUT WITH THE LIBERALS BREAK DOWN.

6. CALLAGHAN WILL INCREASINGLY BE HARD PRESSED IN HIS EFFORTS TO KEEP THE LABOR PARTY IN POWER. CONTINUING INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT ARE COSTING THE GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL SUPPORT. THE GOVERNMENT'S PRESENT NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE TRADE UNIONS OVER A THIRD ROUND OF WAGE RESTRAINTS DO NOT APPEAR TO BE GOING SMOOTHLY. THE GOVERNMENT REMAINS COMMITTED TO THE GRANTING OF SOME LEGISLATIVE POWERS TO SCOTLAND AND WALES (THE SO-CALLED DEVOLUTION POLICY), BUT IS HAVING DIFFICULTY DESIGNING A BILL ON THIS HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE THAT CAN MUSTER MAJORITY SUPPORT IN THE COMMONS. IT IS CONFIDENTIAL

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HAVING SIMILAR DIFFICULTY OVER DIRECT ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT.

7. THE PRESENT OUTLOOK OF POLITICS IN BRITAIN, THEREFORE, IS FOR THE CONTINUATION OF A MINORITY LABOR GOVERNMENT IN POWER SUPPORTED BY THE TRADE UNIONS, WITH OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES UNWILLING TO UNITE IN OPPOSITION TO FORCE A GENERAL ELECTION. THE LABOR GOVERNMENT CAN BE EXPECTED TO AVOID CONTENTIOUS LEGISLATION, TO CONTINUE ITS PARALLEL EFFORTS TO REDUCE INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT, HOPING TO POSTPONE A GENERAL ELECTION UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE ECONOMIC CLIMATE IMPROVES ITS CHANCES FOR SUCCESS. THE NEXT MONTHS WILL BE A TIME OF CONTINUOUS PERIL FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND ONE OF OPPORTUNITY FOR THE OPPOSITION. END CONFIDENTIAL.

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